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FOR NEA/ARP AND DRL

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [AE](#)
SUBJECT: UAE WOMEN PREFER NOT TO DEFINE SUCCESS BY GENDER

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Sensitive but unclassified; please protect accordingly

11. (SBU) Summary: Much has been written about the (relatively) progressive UAE attitude towards women and the great successes of Emirati women academically and professionally. Female Emirati contacts report they are pleased with the development of women in the UAE but still feel constrained by traditional attitudes. Despite some progress, they appear to accept that the parameters of female self determination in the UAE continue to be defined largely by men. End summary.

Real Emirati Women...Cook?

12. (U) The comments of one older woman (a grandmother, mother of eight, and step-mother of two) sum up the progress made. In halting but clear English, she explained that as a girl there was no expectation that she would attend university or even high school -- she only finished primary school. Her mother taught her "the important things that a woman must know to be a good wife." She cited the predictable skills of "being a good cook and a good mother." She did not say whether or not she wanted higher education, but recalled her mother "beating" and "forcing" her to learn how to cook. She recalled the resentment she felt at not being allowed to play and have fun the way her brothers did, but at the time, could not conceive of anything else. She holds no resentment towards her mother or the women of her generation as they "wanted me to understand my place."

13. (U) The older woman further noted with resignation that she had only succeeded in teaching one of her six daughters to cook and that had only happened in the months prior to her daughter's marriage. She pointed out that women like her daughter had so many options available that being a wife and mother was only one of many paths. One mother of three in her mid thirties admitted that she had chosen to marry early, not pursue a tertiary degree, and that it was important for her to learn how to "be a good wife". She expressed no feelings of inferiority to those women (including her own sisters) who had chosen professional lives and applauded the direction in which women's lives were heading. She mused "my daughters will have so much freedom when they grow up."

14. (U) Interestingly, it was the mothers of young girls who were the most comfortable with the status of women today although they admitted that there was still room for progress. One, a shy and thoughtful public servant in her mid-thirties, expressed annoyance that conversations about UAE women always seemed to remark on women's successes because they were women rather than commend the successes themselves. She felt that after a generation of focusing on female education, it was time for the conversation to shift and for women to be judged on the merits of their achievements rather than on their abilities "as women." A kindergarten teacher and mother of two young girls strongly agreed that a decoupling was needed and said she often reminded her husband to compliment their daughters' achievements without focusing on gender. She said that as a teacher, she felt that self determination should be encouraged early and would pave the way for the parents of little girls to lift more restrictions when their daughters reach adulthood. "Children are very good teachers," she said.

15. (U) Two younger public servants may be representative of this younger generation. Rattling off the achievements of women -- female diplomats, lawyers, pilots, doctors, etc -- they reported feeling self-induced pressure to pursue higher education and professional lives. One, a mother of two in her mid thirties, originally from Sharjah, admitted that growing up she had always admired her father's academic achievements, proudly telling PolOff that "he went to university in Iraq", and felt that his education had informed the openness with which he raised his children. She recognized early that his encouragement to aim high was different from the attitudes of her friends' fathers. Another woman, in her late twenties and not yet married, expressed similar sentiments, saying that she felt no pressure to succeed from her father, but that "he always talked to me about the world, life, politics, and I was just interested in finding out for myself." By comparison, her mother neither encouraged nor discouraged her university career because "she knew that I was very stubborn and would do what I wanted to do anyway."

BUT MEN STILL LEAD

16. (U) A reserved young housewife and mother of two, her apparent conservatism underscored by the veil she wears over her face (in front of men), expressed anger and resentment at the failure of some families to keep pace with changes. She, a Dubai native -- a disappearing minority -- felt "frustrated" at growing up during the height of Dubai's development, being exposed to a number of interesting experiences (including two years abroad as a child), and yet, her family "forced" her to marry as soon as she graduated from college. With tremendous effort to hide her resentment, she sighed "Of course, as soon as I got married, my husband wouldn't let me work. Now my degree is wasted and I'll never be able to do anything." She also added, "I know this sounds silly, but all I want to do is take my children to Disneyland and I can't even do that unless my husband or father goes with me."

17. (SBU) A healthily ambitious young public servant echoed similar frustration at families failing to keep pace with the changed world in which their daughters were growing up. She lamented the fact that "I really wanted to go to college in the United States, but nobody will let their daughters go away." PolOff questioned this, given her father's general open mindedness, but she said she always knew that "even if he was comfortable with it, the community would tell him that it was against the religion." Clearly still resentful of this particular restriction, she told PolOff that "I want to talk about [constraints on women], but right now it still makes me sad." (Note: This young woman was selected for an International Visitor Program sponsored by the USG in 2007 but was unable to travel due to family insistence that she have an escort. End note.)

COMMENT

18. (SBU) The "women's movement" in the UAE context is much more tempered than its Western equivalents, with the number of Emirati women overtly advocating for significantly more freedoms remaining in the minority. Outwardly most women appear to have accepted the national narrative that women can avail themselves of many opportunities -- yet choose to describe their evolution in terms of a gift granted by society rather than an inherent right. As successful as the women are, the parameters of social tradition continue to be defined largely by family -- and men. Credit for the decision to promote female education is given to the late founding father of the country, Sheikh Zayed; the high profile appointments of women into ministerial, ambassadorial, and judicial positions were decisions taken by male rulers with a vision to promote the development of women. Even in speaking to this small sample of women, the greatest influences in their lives with respect to education and careers were their fathers. None of them credited their mothers with encouraging them to explore broader horizons. Rather, when probed about who specifically is opposed to them pursuing opportunities abroad, all women agreed that it was their mothers although the edicts were given by the family patriarchs.

End comment.

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